

11 Working with fathers

The need to personalise services for fathers, male carers and other male relatives

All Sure Start Children's Centre services should be responsive to the level of local need to support fathers in their relationship with their partner and in their role as a parent.

Fathers matter to children's development. Research based on the National Child Development Study (which keeps information about 17,000 children and follows them up at regular intervals) shows that where fathers are involved when a child is 7 years of age:

- ▶ there is a positive relationship to later educational attainment;
- ▶ there is an association with a good parent-child relationship in adolescence; and
- ▶ children in separated families were protected from later mental health problems.

This study also found that a father's early involvement with a child was associated with continuing involvement throughout childhood and adolescence. Other research has highlighted the importance of supporting young and vulnerable fathers in their involvement with their new babies. The researchers found that it was the quality of a father's relationship with his partner during pregnancy which was the biggest influence on subsequent involvement with the child – and not family background or social disadvantage.

Barriers to fathers' involvement

It can be a big challenge to involve fathers and other males in family and early years services. In research, young men report feeling excluded from antenatal and post-natal care, and practitioners admitted that they often knew little about fathers, did not see them as central to their task, and lacked the skills to engage with them. Family support services can be insensitive to fathers' needs, and there can often be a female focus and culture among staff and users of services for children and families. Fathers may feel conspicuous at first when using services and mothers may not always be welcoming.

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Responding to fathers' needs

Irrespective of the degree of involvement they have in the care of their child, fathers should be given the support and opportunities they need to play their parental role effectively. Specific areas where fathers may require support include:

- ▶ as direct care-givers to their children. Fathers can lack confidence or strong cultural role models in taking responsibility for children's day-to-day physical and emotional needs;
- ▶ in understanding the value of play and how it can be used to help children develop socially, emotionally and intellectually;
- ▶ in demonstrating their emotional attachment to their children. Fathers who are able to show how much they care about their children are giving them a strong role model for future relationships;

- ▶ in developing and maintaining a positive, co-operative relationship with the mother of the children;
- ▶ finding work, training for work or learning opportunities to enable them to better support their families, and financial support for such learning;
- ▶ help with benefits and entitlements, including housing; and
- ▶ during times of exceptional stress, for example following separation or on arrival in the UK as a refugee.

Family support

There are many situations where fathers have support, but in many cases support from the family is not there. Teenage fathers, for example, may need help to 'grow into' their role as fathers especially if they have not had a strong fatherly presence in their own life. Children's centres should provide services – probably group support – to meet the needs of these men.

Making fathers welcome

Fathers feel welcome where they are accepted and are free to participate without being judged. Staff in children's centres should welcome all parents who are visiting for the first time. They should greet fathers and help them to feel 'at home', making introductions to other parents and a fathers' worker if there is one.

Children's centre staff will need training for working with fathers. This will challenge any negative attitudes towards fathers' ability to care for their children and about their involvement in services; inform them about the important roles fathers play in their children's lives and offer staff strategies for engaging and supporting them. Some centres have found having a fathers' worker a very effective way to coordinate services focused on fathers' needs, and help develop a whole team approach to engaging routinely with both parents.

Case study 11.1

Support for a full-time lone father

A 33 year-old father is divorced and looks after his small daughter full time:

"It had got to the point where I was stuck at home with her all day and I was starting to snap at her...you can't have an intelligent conversation with a two and a half year old".

He was introduced to an SSLP by a health visitor. The fathers' worker has been a constant support. *"He came up to me and said 'I'll get you involved in this, I'll get you sorted with that'. I wanted to get on a course and he's arranged that, he's said bring her along to the playgroup and it's there. Nothing that's been told me has not reached my expectations. People are ready to jump in and help out, you know it's there. But you stand out in the street and ask most of the blokes who walk down here with a pushchair, most blokes will tell you but they won't tell you in front of the missus but they will tell you that they don't know how to cope."*

Activities for men

Fathers generally appreciate some services which are designed specifically for men where they can meet their peers, engage in activities together, and talk about their lives as fathers. Many fathers do not feel they are expert parents and an all male environment can enable them to feel more confident about interacting with their child and seeking advice.

Traditional male interests can provide the basis for engaging with fathers, offer an opportunity for fathers to spend time with their children, access 'peer support', one-to-one information, or advice and advocacy from a skilled worker. Other ideas include working together on an allotment; visiting a swimming pool; taking a group to the toy library on a Saturday morning; developing a play area; barbecues in summer; men's health days. Fathers should be consulted about the kind of services they want and have a part in planning them. There will need to be a mix of different services

Case study 11.2

Activities for men

'Dads Matter' is a partnership between the Sure Start Plus Teenage Pregnancy Team, the MASTS project (supported housing for young people) and Café West (a healthy living centre, in the heart of the community) in Bradford. MASTS were chosen as partners, both because they had already carried out work with young men and because their client-age is up to 25 (many young fathers are not teenagers). Café West has a good quality crèche where fathers can play with their children, as well as fitness facilities, computer suite, confidential quiet space and access to other learning opportunities. From the outset, the young dads (who include estranged dads, step fathers and fathers-to-be) have influenced the programme, choosing the venue, designing publicity leaflets and ensuring, through regular evaluation and consultation, that the project meets their needs. Dads Matter offers a one-one confidential drop in, free lunch, internet access, accredited group work and sports and fitness. Partnership with other professionals to deliver a range of services is key. These have included a local Family Mediator (looking at Fathers Rights), a Health Visitor (delivering Baby First Aid) and a Basic Skills tutor (facilitating C.V. writing, filling in application forms and interview techniques). Dads Matter also offers training to local professionals, to help put fathers on their agenda.

available to meet the needs of different fathers and this will include group-based and one-to-one programmes, home visiting, outreach and centre-based services and a mix of specialist – men-only, and generic father-friendly services.

Other activities that have been found to be effective include:

- ▶ a weekly coffee morning for fathers;
- ▶ helping fathers to find work by putting them in touch with employment agencies;
- ▶ organising talks for fathers on topics like child nutrition, smoking cessation, men's health and personal safety;

- ▶ arranging one-to-one sessions for fathers with housing managers to discuss accommodation issues; and
- ▶ arranging day trips for fathers and children together.

Fathers' workers could be involved in training colleagues about engaging with fathers and working with mothers on attitudes towards and relationships with the fathers of their children.

Employing male workers

Some children's centres have found that employing male workers in a variety of capacities has helped encourage fathers to get involved. In some cases a local father has been a service user and gone on to work in the programme.

Male workers bring a particular perspective to the provision of services, act as a male presence that can help men feel the service is 'for them' and ensure that services are delivered in a way that will appeal to other men. This is important when designing services for men but it will also improve the delivery of other, more general services.

Further information:

- *Fathers in Sure Start Local Programmes (2003)* on www.surestart.gov.uk
- *Guide to Working with Fathers and the Fatherhood Quality Mark (FQM)* www.fathersdirect.com
- *Project findings: The young fathers project to develop and evaluate a model of working with vulnerable fathers* Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA), 23 New Road Brighton, BN1 1WZ (TSA website: www.tsa.uk.com)
- *Fathers' Involvement in their Children's Education: A Review of Research and Practice*, NFPI 2005 (www.nfpi.org/data/whatsnew/index.htm)